

Learning and Living the Dhamma in a New Spirit of Independence

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More than fifty years of existence, we believe, is long enough time for any in the species of *homo sapiens* to reach a stage of acceptable maturity. Otherwise we come to be called over grown babies. The Sri Lankans do not need specially calibrated scanners to determine to which category they really belong. The 4th day of the month of February [in the year 1948] happens to be the day on which Ceylon [as Sri Lanka was then conveniently called], the much cherished tea-brewing island colony in the Indian ocean changed hands from the British Empire builders to be ruled by the local sahibs. We had the fortune at that time, good or bad, to be seated in that gorgeously decorated temporary pavilion [not missing the nation's pride of *rali-palan*], in the ancient race course of Colombo.

His Royal Highness, the Duke of Gloucester, handed over the document of transfer. Grand celebrations followed, including lavish tamashas, exclusively for the elite and the grand, resplendent displays of fire works which concealed under their flashes of brilliant colour the real flames of ethnic fire which were being steadily fanned at the time by the so-called minority but giant sized champions. Those who pretended then or pretend now not to know these rumblings, not necessarily beneath the surface, have necessarily to turn in their graves. Some of them have individually paid the price they have had to pay.

As a nation, the Sri Lankans are now paying the price for the sins of others. It is too expensive to turn one's back on history. Very few leaders of the country at the time felt any need to be sensitive to these, as long as the fare on their tables was rich enough and they felt were even temporarily crowned with laurels. Very few ever realised that those very crowns would, in their very life time, would end up, turning into crowns of thorns.

What is not written about the history of religion, culture and politics of Sri Lanka is much more valuable than what has been written and published in English, Sinhala and even Pali. But the source material for these, with genuineness of their own, is there, clearly embedded in some of the written records themselves. Centuries that followed the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has witnessed the intermingling of many diverse, and at times even contradictory utterances, woven together to look like a homogenous whole. Even top grade researchers are seen stumbling over these.

The truth is far from what is in hand with us. Very vital episodes of national history, like wars of liberation and independence fought in this country, for very worthy causes, have been utterly distorted, both by those who merely record them the way they feel as well as by much cleverer descendants of theirs who subsequently research on them, quite often inadequately guided. Polarised visions of heterogeneous groups, disagreeing to a greater or lesser degree on account of sectarian traditions, are seen to be challenging one another. Lamentably, this is the state of research in our country.

They have come to us, or we may say even invaded us from our neighbouring countries like India, Myanmar [Burma] and Siam [Thailand]. Traditions within the same fold, like textual and Commentarial, separated from each other by centuries, are forced to appear as homogenous and consistent. In more recent times, more fanciful versions of interpretations, imported from distant lands like America, England and even Germany have found their way here, quite often smuggled by local agents domiciled abroad.

It is with the reality of this background in mind that we formulate the title of this article as **Learning and Living the Dhamma in a new spirit of Independence**. The **Dhamma** is the wholesome message [*adikalyanam majjhe kalyaṇam pariyoṣanakalyanam*] which the Buddha made known to mankind for the purpose of their salvation. Do the Buddhists in Sri Lanka, with the newly emerging metropolitan elite [through their own newer monastic centres of diverse origin], as

well as the less elite who like to mingle with them, know to any extent what this Sakyamuni Gotama's concept of salvation is or the unfailing way for its achievement in Nirvana? Yet other newer groups of propagandists of the metropolitan import type endeavour to present the Lotus Sutra [or the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka] as an early authentic text preached by Gotama the Buddha. Let us ourselves first know who is taking whom for a ride in this country of Disney land.

This is why we, the less updated old traditionalists, keep on harping about **learning and living the dhamma**. There are many degrees of difference in listening to your favourite Dhamma sermons over the television, radio or even to your today's most favourite CD's. Just imagine a situation like this. If ever you go to your favourite restaurant in the city, get the menu card and indeed order the food. When the food comes, enjoy its very sight and smell and eat it yourself. Do not pass it on to the cat on the floor who is gazing at you. The real, real dhamma of the Buddha insists that having heard the dhamma, you must yourself reflect on it and ponder over it. This is how the correct vision or *samma ditthi* of the Noble Eight-fold Path grows [*dve paccaya samma ditthiya uppadaya - parato ghoso yoniso ca manasikaro*].

Once you get to this stage, **the dhamma insists that you live the dhamma and live it well**. This means that one shall conduct one's day to day living in accordance with the dhamma. You shall not live it in a half-hearted way, merely to flatter the monk who preaches it [*Dhammam care sucaritam na nam duccharitam care*]. We pray let not this, the mere listening to the words as they come to you over the media, whatever that be, turn out to be the order of the day. **Living the dhamma well in one's daily life, and not a mere metropolitan monk-adoring-cult**, brings about all the happiness one wishes for [*dhammo sucinno sukham avahati*]. Dhamma is said to protect and take good care of the person **who lives in accordance with it** [*dhammo have rakkhati dhammacarim*].

Finally a word about the thinking on the dhamma in a **new spirit of**

independence. It is a theme which we wish to suggest here. It is nothing new to Buddhism nor to the Buddhists. It was anticipated by the Buddha himself that, in course of time as the centuries and millennia rolled by, nay even decades, there would be interpreters of his teachings in diverse ways, different to what he meant when he delivered them. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta [DN. II. 124 ff.], the Buddha himself is seen indicating that many monks would, after his passing away, point out many sources of authority [*mahapadesa*] for what they present as the word of the Buddha. He forewarns about such situations and cautions that Buddhists should fall back on textual authority and none other [*sutte otaretabbani vinaye sandassetabban*].

Under a very misleading phraseology called **development of Buddhist thought** [by whom, when and where would be pertinent questions to be asked in this context], even academics of today uphold such a process. To them, this as a process of development is undeniably post-parinibbana. Our generosity would not extend any further than to permit the use only of words like **deflection** and **deviation** to designate correctly what happens to Buddha's teachings in this process. As for the modernity and contemporaneity that the Buddhist elite and the neo-propagandists would like to bestow on Buddhism, let it be remembered, and remembered well, that more than thirty years ago Buddhist scholars of Japan opted, with a sense of pride, to call our historical Buddha Sakyamuni the **Eternal Buddha**, in spite of the much larger and more glamorous Buddha Amida who has been looming prominently in their own horizon.

Over the centuries, the Buddhists of Sri Lanka too have inherited a tradition of bundling up together diverse religious traditions which clearly and definitely belong to different periods of time and traditions and therefore stand incompatibly divergent one from the other. Even the Commentaries of Sri Lanka tell us that there have been Sri Lankan monks of the day, well outside the universities and with apparently no desire for professorial status, who were able to identify what they discover and detect to be errors of judgement and pronounce these boldly in

public.[See Encyclopaedia of Buddhism Vol. III. p. 709f. Art. *Catuparisuddhisila*]. Study diligently the story of our brilliant Buddhist scholar monk Tipitaka Culabhaya Thera and his magnanimous teacher Dipavasi Sumana Thera and their highly commendable intellectual honesty and mutual respectability.

It is regrettable to record here that in Sri Lanka today doctrinal distortions resulting from such Commentarial misdirections stubbornly persist at all levels of Buddhist learning in the country, both monastic and secular. The Dhammapadatthakatha, the somewhat self-willed Commentary to our delightful handbook of Buddhism, the Dhammapada, has too many such deflections and deviations from the original. Translators of the Dhammapada into English and Sinhala, both Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan who are caught up in this storm, rarely escape without getting mangled. Newer and newer editions of the Dhammapada, which ingenious publishers speedily put into the market show only more and more colourful dust covers, with hardly any change in the translations.

We wind up today, showing one single sample for your diligent testing. Test your courage and your wisdom. We pray you keep the result to yourself. Read the Dhammapada, Chapter XII, i.e. Atta Vagga, Verse No, 157. The text has *tinnam anntaram yamam patijaggeyya pandito*. Almost all Sinhala translations would render it as: Either in one's childhood, or in one's youth or in one's old age, one should collect merit for oneself. The plain Pali of the text would mean nothing different to: At least during one of the three watches of the night, a wise man should keep vigil over himself.

The way you have been brought up in Buddhist Sri Lanka would make all the difference. In Sri Lanka today, we are compelled to leave the choice to you.

